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Measuring Prison Education Across States: Development of a National Scoring System

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ABSTRACT

Prison education reduces recidivism and improves post-release employment, yet access remains inconsistent across U.S. correctional institutions. This study introduces the first standardized scoring system of its kind to evaluate prison education programs across private, state, and federal institutions. Using data from the 2019 Census of State and Federal Adult Correctional Facilities, it identifies disparities in educational access and examines how institutional factors, regional differences, and state policies shape program availability. Findings reveal substantial regional variation, with Southern states lagging behind their peers. Education access strongly correlates with the participation of incarcerated persons, underscoring the importance of availability. Additionally, state policies – such as centralized oversight and structured incentives – directly affect program breadth. This study provides a comparative framework for policymakers to evaluate and improve correctional education systems. The findings support the adoption of evidence-based strategies, including mandatory assessments, centralized oversight, sentence reduction incentives, and performance-based funding, to expand access, improve reentry outcomes, and ultimately enhance public safety.

KEYWORDS

Prison education; correctional education; vocational training in prisons; second chance Pell Grants; prison reform

Introduction

Education has been a long-standing part of the identity of American corrections since the first true correctional organization, Walnut Street Jail, was established in 1790, and no later than 1798, maintained a small school (Skidmore, 1948). However, the presence and type of educational programs offered in US prisons have changed significantly over time. In particular, the expansion and reduction of educational access have often been shaped by legislative and policy decisions. The use of Pell Grants for incarcerated individuals has been debated since their inclusion in this population in 1972 (Ubah, 2004). However, a shift toward punitive policies in the late 20th century led to significant cutbacks in prison education funding. The Sentencing Reform Act of 1984 and subsequent "Get Tough on Crime" legislation resulted in a decline in educational opportunities within US jails and prisons. These restrictions culminated in the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, which eliminated Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated individuals. As a result, participation in college prison programs dropped by half between 1991 and 2004.

Since 2015, prison education has experienced a resurgence with the introduction of the Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative (SCP). Operated by the US Department of Education, SCP provides Pell Grants to incarcerated individuals for tuition, fees, licensing, books, and other educational-related expenses without an obligation to repay the funds. Between 2016 and 2022, more than 40,000 incarcerated individuals accessed Pell Grant funding through SCP, with participation expected to rise further following the 2023 designation of Prison Education Programs (PEP) (Taber & Muralidharan, 2023). However, despite this progress, educational opportunities within prisons remain far below pre-1980s levels (Stickle & Sprick Schuster, 2023), and access varies significantly across jurisdictions.

As of 2024, approximately 1.3 million of the over 1.9 million incarcerated individuals in the US are held in state and federal prisons (Sawyer & Wagner, 2024). Each year, between 600,000 and 800,000 individuals

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are released from prison (Carson, 2018; US Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.). Research consistently demonstrates that prison education programs reduce recidivism and improve employment outcomes upon release (Stickle & Sprick Schuster, 2023; Wilson et al., 2000). Nevertheless, while the benefits of prison education are well-documented, there remains limited data on the actual availability and quality of prison educational programs nationwide.

Additionally, access to educational programming remains inconsistent across states, with significant disparities in availability, oversight, and funding. The lack of a standardized framework makes it difficult to assess which states are leading in prison education and which are lagging behind. To address this gap, this study evaluates the current state of prison educational programs across the US and introduces a scoring system to assess program accessibility and quality. This metric will enable private, state, and federal governments to compare educational offerings, identify areas for improvement, and implement evidence-based strategies to expand access to education in correctional settings.

Literature review

Since education has long been identified as one of the five major barriers to successful reentry (see Denney et al., 2014), considerable attention has been paid to studying the impact of prison education on the outcomes of those released from incarceration (see Davis et al., 2013; Kim & Clark, 2013; Pompoco et al., 2017). Studies have shown that lower levels of educational attainment are correlated with higher rates of arrest and incarceration (Lochner & Moretti, 2004).

Prison educational programming can be generally categorized into four different types. The first type is high school equivalency programs, which include General Educational Development (GED) and diploma programs aimed at ensuring incarcerated persons without these credentials obtain them before release. The second type is vocational training, which provides skills in fields such as welding, automotive repair, cosmetology, building maintenance, and culinary arts. The third type is Adult Basic Education (ABE) programming, designed to improve literacy, writing, and math skills for those who have not reached a 12th-grade proficiency level. The fourth type is postsecondary education, allowing incarcerated persons to pursue associate or bachelor's degrees. While these categories reflect the general structure of prison education, access to these programs varies significantly across institutions and states.

Incarcerated persons and education

Recent research on inmate educational attainment is limited, with much of the foundational data now decades old. One of the most frequently cited sources, Harlow (2003), highlights long-standing disparities between incarcerated individuals and the general public in terms of educational attainment. Female incarcerated persons tend to be better educated than male incarcerated persons, and Black and Hispanic incarcerated individuals are less likely to have a high school diploma or equivalent than their white counterparts (Harlow, 2003). Younger incarcerated persons are less likely to have completed high school compared to older incarcerated individuals. These disparities are even more pronounced given that non-incarcerated Black and Hispanic Americans under 25 have made significant educational gains in the past several decades (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017).

The gap between incarcerated and non-incarcerated individuals is stark. Two out of every five individuals (41%) in US jails and prisons lack a high school diploma or GED (Harlow, 2003), compared to just 11% of the public (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). A 2014 study by New America found that those incarcerated in state and federal prisons are one-third as likely to have attained a certificate, associate degree, or higher education credential than the public. Only 15% of incarcerated individuals earn a postsecondary credential before or during incarceration, compared to 45% of the general population (New America, 2014).

These education gaps have serious implications for reentry. By 2031, an estimated 72% of all US jobs will require a bachelor's degree or advanced training (Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2023). With only 28% of jobs projected to be available to individuals with a high school diploma or less, the lack of educational qualifications among incarcerated individuals severely limits their post-release employment prospects. These challenges are compounded by the stigma of a criminal record, which further reduces job opportunities (Davis et al., 2013) and are compounded by the continued neglect of forensic mental health as factor in rehabilitation (Kuen et al., 2025). These employment and educational barriers are often

amplified in rural areas, where returning citizens face additional obstacles such as limited program availability, transportation challenges, and reduced access to social services (Stickle, Denney, et al., 2024)

Prison education programming impacts

Studies consistently show that prison education reduces recidivism, improves employment outcomes, and decreases negative inmate behaviors (Chappell, 2003; Davis et al., 2013; Steurer & Smith, 2003). Among the first major meta-analyses, Wilson et al. (2000) examined 33 studies and found that incarcerated persons who participated in education programs experienced an 11% reduction in recidivism and were more likely to secure employment post-release. Subsequent studies by Bouffard et al. (2000) and Cecil et al. (2000) confirmed similar findings, though both emphasized the need for improved assessment methodologies.

Another meta-analysis conducted by Davis et al. (2013) analyzed 58 studies from 1980 to 2011. Their findings revealed that participation in prison education programs led to a 43% lower likelihood of recidivating compared to non-participants, with a 13% overall reduction in recidivism risk. These reductions were consistent across program types, with the greatest impact observed in high school and GED programs (30% reduction in recidivism). Additionally, those who participated in education programs had 13% greater odds of securing employment post-release, with vocational training yielding the highest employment impact at 28%.

Bozick et al. (2018) examined 57 published studies examining the effect of prison education on both recidivism and employment outcomes. In their analysis of studies from 1980 to 2017, they found a positive impact on recidivism. Specifically, those who participated in correctional education had a 28% lower overall likelihood of recidivism when compared to those who did not participate in prison education programming. However, no positive impact was found when examining the effect of prison education programming participation on securing employment after release.

The most recent and comprehensive meta-analysis, conducted by Stickle and Sprick Schuster (2023), further confirmed the positive impacts of prison education. Their study found that prison education programs reduce recidivism by 6.7 percentage points, improve job prospects by 3.1 percentage points, and increase annual earnings by an average of $564.

Importantly, these studies demonstrate that prison education offers a strong economic return on investment (ROI). Stickle and Sprick Schuster (2023) found that vocational education provides a 205% ROI, secondary education a 124% ROI, and ABE programs a 106% ROI. These economic benefits further reinforce the value of expanding educational programming in prisons.

The second chance act (SCA) and educational expansion

The Second Chance Act (SCA) was a bipartisan initiative first passed in 2008 and reauthorized in 2018 (Office of Justice Programs, 2024). The overarching goal of SCA is to provide federal funding to state, local, and tribal governments, as well as nonprofit organizations, to improve reentry outcomes. By addressing key barriers to reentry, including education, employment, housing, transportation, and social support (Denney et al., 2014), SCA aims to reduce recidivism and the financial burden associated with repeat incarceration.

From 2009 to 2023, $664 million in grants under SCA have been distributed to 49 states and three US territories, benefiting 182,000 justice-involved individuals (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2023) among those who participated in SCA-funded programs, more than half enrolled in housing, employment, or educational services. Specifically, 64% of participants received some form of education, with 38% earning a vocational certificate, 19% obtaining a high school diploma or GED, and 7% completing a higher education degree.

A study by Amasa-Annang and Scutelnicu (2016) examined the effectiveness of SCA-funded initiatives across three states – Mississippi, Georgia, and Alabama – and found that these programs significantly reduced recidivism, particularly among young male adults, the demographic most likely to reoffend. Georgia, which received the most SCA funding, saw the greatest reduction in recidivism (−12.4%), while Mississippi also observed positive impacts. Alabama, however, did not experience a reduction in recidivism. These findings highlight that while SCA programs can be effective, their success depends on how they are implemented and supported at the state level.

A major turning point in prison education policy came with the introduction of the Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative (SCP) in 2015, which restored Pell Grant access to incarcerated individuals for the first time since its removal in 1994. Operated by the US Department of Education, SCP allows incarcerated individuals to use Pell Grants for tuition, fees, licensing, books, and other educational expenses without the obligation to repay funds. Between 2016 and 2022, over 40,000 incarcerated individuals participated in SCP-funded postsecondary education, earning nearly 12,000 credentials, including certificates, associate degrees, and bachelor's degrees (Taber & Muralidharan, 2023).

The impact of SCP extends beyond credential attainment. Researchers with the Vera Institute of Justice (Taber & Muralidharan, 2023) found that those who utilized Pell Grants under SCP reported enhanced personal identity development, increased self-actualization, and improved cognitive skills. Moreover, Pell Grant recipients noted that participating in postsecondary education helped them develop long-term career aspirations and a greater sense of agency in shaping their future.

With the passage of the FAFSA Simplification Act, Pell Grant eligibility was fully restored as of July 1, 2023, making nearly 800,000 incarcerated individuals eligible for financial aid. This unprecedented policy shift is expected further to expand educational programming opportunities across state and federal prisons. Despite these policy advancements, wide disparities in educational access remain across correctional systems. While some states have integrated SCP funding to expand their prison education programs significantly, others have struggled to develop infrastructure that allows for large-scale participation. These variations highlight the need for a standardized approach to evaluating prison education systems, ensuring that opportunities are equitably distributed and effectively implemented.

The present study

Historically, disparities have always existed between those incarcerated and the general US population. When comparing the proportion of Americans under 25 who earned a high school diploma from 1991 to 2016, the percentage grew by 10.6% from 78.4% to 89% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). However, those incarcerated during the same period saw only an increase of 6.7%, from 44.4% in 1991 to 51.1% in 2016 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017).

Despite research consistently showing that prison educational programs can lower recidivism, help increase employment prospects upon release, and improve inmate behavior (see Davis et al., 2013; Steurer & Smith, 2003), significant gaps remain in our understanding of how these programs are distributed and whether state-level policies influence their availability. Moreover, no standardized framework currently exists to assess and compare prison education programming across different correctional systems.

To address these gaps, this study systematically evaluates the current state of educational programming in US prisons and introduces a novel scoring system to rank states based on their educational offerings and policies. Specifically, the present study has two primary objectives. First, it examines the extent and variation of educational programming within US prisons, identifying disparities in access across different facility types and jurisdictions. Second, it assesses the impact of these programs on inmate educational participation, exploring how institutional and policy factors influence engagement.

Methodology & data

The data for the present study comes from three sources. The first source is the 2019 Census of Correctional Facilities (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2019), which provides information on prison characteristics across the US. The second source is the 2016 Survey of Prison Inmates (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). This source provides information regarding student enrollment in prison education programs.

The third and final source of information is hand-collected state-level data that examined whether states had an administrative office overseeing prison education. This data also examined whether incarcerated persons held within the respective state prisons were automatically enrolled in educational programs or if they opted to self-enroll. All information related to potential sentence reductions for participation in educational programs is from the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL, 2021).

Results

Results for the present study are divided into three research areas. The first area examines the question of whether offering vocational programming education to incarcerated persons leads to increased educational participation. That is, does the mere presence of educational offerings within a prison increase participation in educational programming? This question is important as the antithesis would suggest that the mere offering of such programming would not be a good use of resources. The second research question examined is: what strategies can states employ to enhance educational offerings and inmate participation in educational programming? The third and final research question is where do states rank when considering the four educational categories essential to prison education: (1) Literacy/Adult Basic Education (ABE), (2) Secondary Education, (3) Vocational Training, and (4) College Education.

Availability and participation in education

The first research question examined whether the availability of educational programs within prisons influences inmate participation rates. Specifically, this study analyzed the relationship between vocational education offerings and the percentage of incarcerated persons enrolled in vocational courses across states.[1] A Pearson correlation analysis revealed a statistically significant positive association ($r = .20$, $p = 0.05$, $N = 50$), indicating that states with greater availability of vocational programs tend to report higher inmate enrollment rates. Supporting this, a linear regression analysis (see Figure 1) found that a 1 percentage point increase in vocational program availability is associated with a 0.196 percentage point increase in participation. While modest, these findings reinforce prior literature suggesting access is a critical barrier to educational engagement for incarcerated population.

For example, states where at least 75% of facilities offer vocational training tend to report inmate participation rates exceeding 50%, whereas states with limited vocational education availability (below 40%) show significantly lower enrollment levels.

Prison characteristics and educational offerings

For the second research question, we examined the relationship between prison characteristics and educational offerings. This analysis was completed using the 2019 Census of Correctional Facilities. Eight educational programming categories were found in the 2019 Census of Correctional Facilities. These eight categories are Literacy Training, Adult Basic Education (ABE), Secondary Education, Vocational Education, College, English as a Second Language (ESL), Special Education, and Study Release. Each category serves as the basis of the analysis that identifies the potential relationship(s) between prison characteristics and educational opportunity availability.

Literacy Training assists adults lacking key literacy skills in forming the fundamentals for intermediate and proficient reading. *ABE* focuses on building blocks for reading, writing, and mathematics. *Secondary Education* is meant for those attempting a high school diploma or General Education Development (GED). *Vocational Education* focuses on job training programs for job-specific skills, such as welding, carpentry,

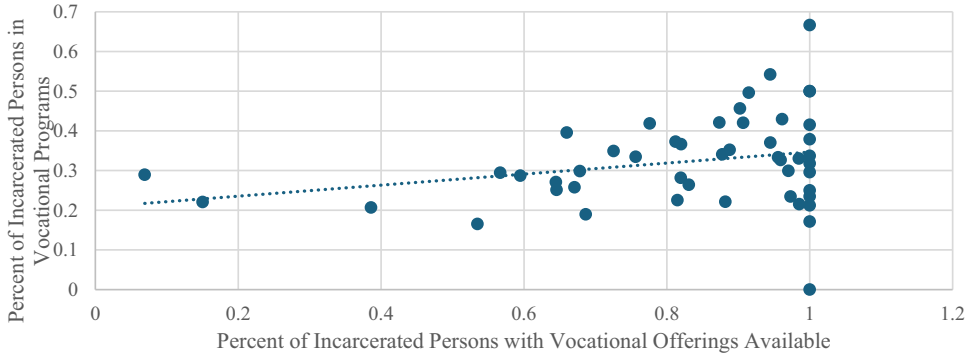


Figure 1. Vocational offerings and participation.

and electrical work. *College programs* are those focused on obtaining an associate or bachelor's degree. *English as a Second Language (ESL)* programs focus on teaching English skills to non-native speakers. *Special Education* is meant for those diagnosed with a learning or intellectual disability. Lastly, *Study Release* allows incarcerated persons to enroll in educational courses outside the prison facility. Typically, *Study Release* programs partner with local community or state colleges. For this section, findings will be further separated by the (1) *Prison Operator (i.e., state, federal, or private)*; (2) *Prison Size*; (3) *Security Classification Level*; (4) *Institutional Sex*; and (5) *Prison Location*.

Prison operator

The operator of individual institutions influences the educational opportunities offered by the institution due to its scope, mission, and available resources. For our analysis, the operators are separated by state, federal, and private. See Table 1. Prison Education Percentages by Operator Type.

State institutions have experienced sizable increases in vocational training and special education. However, the growth in secondary education and ABE has been marginal. As of 2019, state prisons offered fewer educational opportunities than federal prisons, except for study release programs offered in 11% of all state prisons.[2]

Data suggests that federal facilities offer the most extensive educational programming across all operator types. Specifically, ABE, literacy training, secondary education, special education, and college courses were offered in all federal prisons. Vocational training was available in all federal prisons, but one. Study release programs were not provided in any prisons. This disappearance is likely an artifact of other educational programming being available within the facility, thus reducing the need to allow incarcerated persons outside the facility.

Though private prisons have historically offered the fewest educational opportunities across all operator types, private prisons have made considerable gains in recent years. For example, in 1995, private prisons trailed state prisons by 36%. However, in 2019, this gap had closed to just a 6% difference between private and state institutions. Despite this, only 27.6% of private prisons offer programming compared to states at 50.3% and federal prisons providing 100%.

Prison size

Prison size is another essential characteristic for understanding educational programs that can be offered. Table 2 shows the percentage of state and private prisons that provide education by prison population.

Table 1. Prison education percentages by Operator-Type.

	Federal Prisons			State Prisons			Private Prisons		
	1995	2000	2019	1995	2000	2019	1995	2000	2019
Adult Basic Education	92	97.4	100	76	80.4	79.9	40	61.6	74.14
Secondary/GED	100	98.7	100	80.3	83.6	86.7	51.8	70.7	86.2
Special Education	34.8	59.7	100	33.4	39.6	50.3	27.3	21.9	27.6
Vocational	73.2	93.5	99.1	54.5	55.7	70.1	25.5	44.2	62.1
College	68.8	80.5	100	31.4	26.7	45.0	18.2	27.3	37.9
Study Release	5.4	6.5	0	9.3	7.7	11.6	32.7	28.9	0

Table 2. Percentage of prisons that offer education by prison population.

	State Prisons				Private Prisons			
	Bottom 25%	2nd 25%	3rd 25%	Top 25%	Bottom 25%	2nd 25%	3rd 25%	Top 25%
Literacy Training	48.7	89.4	92.8	98.3	33.3	92.9	86.8	100
Adult Basic Education	46.6	84.3	89.8	94.6	33.3	78.6	86.8	100
Secondary/GED	59.7	93.6	92.4	96.7	60	92.9	100	92.8
Special Education	29.2	54.5	54.7	60.3	6.7	35.7	40	28.6
ESL	16.5	34.9	34.3	43.1	6.7	28.6	53.3	35.7
Vocational	40.7	71.1	78.8	86.2	13.3	50	86.7	100
College	26.7	48.9	44.1	58.2	6.7	42.9	46.7	57.1
Study Release	3.8	10.2	12.7	18.8	0	0	0	0
Any Program	67.8	96.2	97	99.6	73.3	100	100	100
Average size	241	638	1,180	2,039	70	615	1,259	2,030

Given the near-universal educational offerings at federal prisons, combined with our focus on state-level policies, we drop federal prisons from all subsequent analyses. We find that the larger the prison, the more likely it is to offer educational programs. Prisons in the bottom quartile of size (with 241 incarcerated persons) were half as likely to have all forms of education except for secondary education.

Table 3 shows our summary statistics at the prisoner, instead of prison, level. A greater percentage of incarcerated persons are found in facilities with each type of program than the total percentage of prisons with each program. This is because larger facilities are more likely to offer educational services. However, it is essential to note that incarcerated persons still do not have access to basic educational programming. Like the above, incarcerated persons in private prisons are less likely to have access to special education programming.

Security classification level

Educational offerings are roughly similar across security levels, though we observe variations in the way that education is delivered, as seen in Table 4. Low, medium, and high-security prisons offer literacy, ABE secondary, and vocational education at similar levels. While low- and high-security prisons are less likely than medium-security prisons to offer ESL or college classes, this could be explained by the high rates of study release program offerings that are likely to include these programs. The most prominent exception to the similarity of the offerings across security levels is the low rate of special education offering a medium-security prison. Since these prisons are also less likely to offer study release programs, it is possible that any difference in study release offerings can explain this gap. In this and all subsequent analyses, we pool state and private prisons together. 5.4% of incarcerated persons in the census sample were in private facilities. This portion of the analysis combines public and private prison data. It is also important to note that 25 prisons did not provide complete answers to education-related questions for the Census. As such, these facilities were classified as lacking educational programming.

Institutions by sex

When comparing educational programming across institutions by sex, no systematic differences are observed. College education was the only difference; however, this difference was not consistent. Prisons serving only females are 10% points higher than all-male prisons to have access to college programming. When examining institutions that hold males and females, they are the least likely institutions to have a college program. Institutionally, sex is not the driver of differences between educational offerings of exclusively male or female

Table 3. Percent of incarcerated Persons in facilities with programs, 2019.

Program	State	Private
Literacy Training	93.8%	94.4%
Adult Basic Education	89.6	92.7
Secondary/GED	93.9	95.4
Special Education	57.9	35.6
ESL	39.8	38.8
Vocational	81	88.1
College	54.5	50.1
Study Release Programs	15.8	0

Table 4. Percent of incarcerated persons with education program offerings by security level.

	Low	Medium	High
Literacy Training	93.3%	94.0	93.1
Adult Basic Education	89.2	89.9	90.1
Secondary/GED	94.6	94.5	93.6
Special Education	60.3	49.2	60.0
ESL	29.7	46.9	31.4
Vocational	81.3	84.6	77.8
College	42.3	61.6	50.6
Study Release Programs	33.3	7.8	16.7
Any Program	98.0	97.3	97.1
Prisons per Prisoner	233/139,789	386/454,929	342/496,000

Table 5. Percent of incarcerated persons with education program offerings by sex.

	Male	Female	Both
Literacy Training	94.0%	93.1%	96.1%
Adult Basic Education	90.6%	90.2%	86.4%
Secondary/GED	94.5%	94.9%	94.1%
Special Education	57.2%	61.3%	70.3%
ESL	38.7%	33.5%	45.8%
Vocational	81.5%	87.8%	86.8%
College	53.3%	63.3%	38.3%
Study Release Programs	14.9%	14.6%	7.5%
Any Program	97.4%	99.0%	97.8%
Prisons per Prisoner	845/993,022	100/77,288	63/52,657

institutions. This is because one would expect an institution serving both males and females to have an equal rate of educational offering.[3] See Table 5 for more information.

Prison location

We find that incarcerated persons in the South[4] are substantially less likely to reside in facilities that have some form of on-site educational programming (see Table 6), with the South seeing the lowest rates of all forms of education except special education (where it is above only the Northeast, and study release programs). The availability of ESL programs was also lowest in the South, even though over half ($n = 9$) of the states in this region have above-average levels of non-native English speakers. For example, states like Florida and Texas have among the highest rates of non-English speakers nationwide.

The Northeast and Western regions had the highest education programming rates. Specifically, over 90% of incarcerated persons in these areas have access to literacy, ABE, secondary, and vocational training. The Midwest offers the highest rate of literacy training at 96.8%, despite only passing the South in educational program opportunities.

When a state underperforms in one category, it will generally underperform in another. For example, states like Alabama, Florida, and Nevada rank in the bottom fifth for offering five types of education. Conversely, Vermont, Maine, Rhode Island, and North Dakota rank in the top 10 for all educational categories. In essence, there exists a trend of prisons offering a wide range of educational programs or very few. Table 7 provides the state average of educational offerings.

State policy analysis

For this section, we collected data for the following three criteria. These three criteria are whether a state:

(1) Implements automatic enrollment in educational programs (or mandates participation) for incarcerated persons who do not meet specific benchmarks, such as literacy levels or GED completion.
(2) Establishes a school district or state office overseeing adult prison education.
(3) Offers sentence reduction incentives for participation in or completion of educational programs.

Table 6. Percent of incarcerated persons with education program offerings by region.

	South	Northeast	West	Midwest
Literacy Training	87.1%	95.8%	93.7%	96.8%
Adult Basic Education	83.7%	93.0%	93.1%	89.5%
Secondary/GED	88.4%	96.7%	94.8%	94.5%
Special Education	55.0%	44.7%	63.3%	60.0%
ESL	20.7%	84.3%	52.8%	31.1%
Vocational	72.4%	90.9%	93.4%	76.1%
College	36.7%	64.4%	71.7%	56.7%
Study Release Programs	25.4%	3.4%	10.2%	0.1%
Any Program	96.0%	99.4%	99.6%	97.8%
Prisons/Prisoners	519/520,419	140/138,808	178/256,075	196/237,193

Table 7. State averages of education offerings.

	Literacy	ABE	Secondary	Special	ESL	Vocational	College	Study Release
AK	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
AL	57.3	49.3	84.9	26.5	7.9	56.7	55.8	0
AR	93.6	93.6	97.3	11.1	93.6	15	12.6	0
AZ	86.7	86.8	86.8	81.2	4.8	85.6	23	0
CA	98.5	98.5	98.6	57.1	73.1	98.6	94.3	8.8
CO	96.3	96.3	96.3	63.8	17.4	86.6	80.6	13.4
CT	94.6	94.6	98.7	93.2	57.9	63.9	80.1	0
DE	97.1	97.1	100	97.1	90.2	67.8	36.1	0
FL	74.4	73.6	74.4	30.3	8.6	55.1	2.9	0
GA	92.4	90.9	88.1	20.1	23.2	67	30.6	1.7
HI	100	100	100	100	55.1	100	20.1	20.1
IA	100	78.6	100	100	57.8	100	80.1	0
ID	94.1	94.1	100	94.1	94.1	94.1	0	0
IL	99.9	84.5	93.9	11.9	20.7	81.8	68.4	0
IN	95.6	96.1	97.5	71.7	31.9	91.8	55.4	0
KS	100	0	70.6	49.8	0	100	0	0
KY	90.7	88.3	96.7	33.7	24.4	88.3	46.8	0
LA	82.1	78.4	100	67.4	7.3	79.2	87.5	0
MA	87.9	71.6	75.8	29.1	87.9	73.7	70	0
MD	90.2	90.2	90.2	65.9	43.4	82	31.8	0
ME	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	0
MI	97.3	97.3	93.5	52.1	46.1	72.6	43.4	0
MN	100	100	100	100	100	6.9	0	0
MO	91	91	91	55.4	0	38.6	22.2	0
MS	95.2	28.4	95.2	48.3	6.9	91.5	80.1	0
MT	76.5	74.1	81.9	68.2	68.2	68.2	68.2	0
NC	65.5	65.9	79.2	13.9	16.5	73.6	63.8	5.9
ND	100	100	100	100	92.5	100	92.5	0
NE	89.6	89.6	89.6	86.4	86.4	68.7	63.7	0
NH	91.8	91.8	100	100	0	100	91.8	0
NJ	97	97	100	37.9	79.1	91.4	62.3	13.3
NM	96.6	79.4	100	74.1	51.5	64.9	88.7	0
NV	72.8	69.3	68.9	28.1	0	81.5	67	14
NY	96.4	95.4	98.3	51.9	83.1	94.5	100	4.5
OH	100	100	100	96.9	19.2	89.8	95.6	0
OK	92.5	92.5	92.5	69.3	6.6	67.8	70.4	0
OR	94.2	94.2	94.2	87.6	94.2	97.3	39.1	0
PA	96.2	91.5	96.2	20.2	96.2	96.2	23.8	0
RI	100	100	100	100	100	100	64.4	13.8
SC	100	80	80	24.3	0	83.1	16.7	0
SD	100	100	100	49.5	0	50.5	0	0
TN	98.6	95.1	91	33.2	11.2	91.8	50	1.4
TX	95.1	95.1	95.1	95.5	13.3	80	36.9	90
UT	100	100	100	100	0	100	0	100
VA	89.3	89.3	89.3	89.3	89.3	91.2	32.5	0
VT	100	100	100	100	100	100	52.5	0
WA	85.8	85.8	100	30.7	63.3	98.5	100	32
WI	89.5	89.5	92.1	33.9	51.7	83.7	64.1	0.7
WV	97.6	97.6	97.6	97.6	0	87.6	91.4	0
WY	100	100	100	87.8	57.2	100	100	0

In their paper, Stickle, Sprick Schuster, et al. (2024) argue that these three policies are the most effective for states to adopt. Automatic enrollment ensures that incarcerated persons who lack basic levels of necessary education receive it while they are incarcerated. It also creates a requirement for prisons and a method of tracking prisons' education levels. Centralized offices or school districts are critical for coordinating educational offerings and maintaining student records. Finally, sentence reductions provide incentives for incarcerated persons to enroll in educational programs, which will, in turn, reduce their likelihood of recidivism. Similarly, by reducing the sentences of incarcerated persons who are enrolled in educational programs, states are identifying incarcerated persons who are at lower risk of recidivism.

Data for both automatic enrollment and the presence of some educational oversight bodies were compiled by examining the respective state's Department of Corrections and education websites. To determine whether a state has an oversight system with either a separate school district for prisons or a designated office with a director was classified as having an office. Policies pertaining to sentence

Table 8. Current state policy.

State	Automatic Enrollment	School District/Office	Sentence Reduction Offered
AL	NO	NO	YES
AK	NO	NO	YES
AZ	YES	NO	YES
AR	YES	YES	YES
CA	YES	YES	YES
CO	NO	NO	YES
CT	NO	YES	YES
DE	NO	NO	YES
FL	YES	NO	YES
GA	NO	NO	YES
HI	NO	NO	NO
ID	NO	YES	YES
IL	YES	YES	YES
IN	NO	NO	YES
IA	YES	NO	YES
KS	NO	NO	YES
KY	NO	NO	YES
LA	NO	NO	YES
ME	NO	NO	NO
MA	NO	YES	YES
MD	NO	NO	YES
MI	YES	NO	NO
MN	NO	YES	NO
MO	YES	NO	NO
MS	NO	NO	YES
MT	NO	NO	NO
NE	NO	YES	YES
NV	NO	NO	YES
NH	NO	YES	YES
NJ	YES	NO	YES
NM	YES	NO	YES
NY	NO	YES	YES
NC	YES	NO	YES
ND	NO	NO	YES
OH	YES	YES	YES
OK	NO	NO	YES
OR	YES	NO	YES
PA	NO	YES	NO
RI	NO	YES	YES
SC	YES	YES	YES
SD	NO	NO	NO
TN	NO	YES	YES
TX	YES	YES	YES
UT	NO	NO	YES
VT	YES	YES	YES
VA	NO	NO	YES
WA	NO	NO	YES
WV	NO	YES	YES
WI	NO	YES	NO
WY	YES	NO	YES

reduction were collected through the National Conference of State Legislatures (2024) report, "Good Time and Earned Time Policies for People in State Prisons."

Table 8 shows the states' policies on automatic enrollment, school district/office, and sentence reduction offered. Nine states do not provide sentence reduction, and five do not employ any of the other two recommended policies. The six states with automatic enrollment and prison school districts also offer sentence reductions once prison education is completed.

State prison education scores

Using data on the availability of education programming and the implementation of specific policies, we ranked all 50 states on a weighted average. This ranking considers the four key aspects of educational offerings (i.e., Literacy/ABE, Secondary Education, Vocational Training, and College Education) and the three prior policies referenced. Some programming categories were combined, such as ABE and Literacy programs. This is because some ambiguities existed in the Census, and there was an inability to distinguish between these categories. For example, Kanas does not offer ABE classes, yet they do offer literacy classes in

all institutions. We combined these two measures as ABE programs can be indistinguishable from literacy classes.

A metric was developed for state offerings by creating an index for the four educational programs.[5] States were placed into quintiles based on the percentage of incarcerated persons accessing each educational program. When a state was in the bottom quintile, it received 0 points. States could increase to 0.25 increments to 1 entire point for those in the top quintile. States were given an additional point based on how many suggested policies were adopted. Final scores for each state could take a value of 0 to 7. If a state were in the top quartile for each category of educational programming, it would receive 4 points and up to three points for its adoption of education policy.

Ohio and California had the highest scores, at 6.5 and 6.25, respectively. Eight other states scored five or higher on the metric: Wyoming, Iowa, Vermont, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Illinois, New York, and North Dakota. See Table 9 for a ranking of states from highest to lowest.

Table 9. State performance scores.

State	ABE/ Literacy	Secondary	Vocational	College	Automatic Enrollment	School District	Sentence Reduction	Total Score
OH	1	1	0.5	1	1	1	1	6.5
CA	0.75	0.75	0.75	1	1	1	1	6.25
WY	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	6
IA	1	1	1	0.75	1	0	1	5.75
RI	1	1	1	0.5	0	1	1	5.5
VT	1	1	1	0.5	0	1	1	5.5
IL	0.75	0.25	0.5	0.75	1	1	1	5.25
NH	0.25	1	1	1	0	1	1	5.25
NY	0.75	0.5	0.75	1	0	1	1	5
ND	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	5
NJ	0.5	1	0.75	0.5	1	0	1	4.75
WV	0.75	0.5	0.5	1	0	1	1	4.75
NM	0.5	1	0	1	1	0	1	4.5
SC	1	0	0.5	0	1	1	1	4.5
TX	0.5	0.5	0.25	0.25	1	1	1	4.5
ID	0.5	1	0.75	0	0	1	1	4.25
TN	0.75	0.25	0.75	0.5	0	1	1	4.25
CT	0.5	0.75	0	0.75	0	1	1	4
ME	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	4
OR	0.5	0.5	0.75	0.25	1	0	1	4
UT	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	4
AR	0.25	0.5	0	0	1	1	1	3.75
WA	0	1	0.75	1	0	0	1	3.75
MI	0.75	0.5	0.25	0.25	1	1	0	3.75
MS	0.5	0.5	0.75	0.75	0	0	1	3.5
CO	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.75	0	0	1	3.25
DE	0.75	1	0.25	0.25	0	0	1	3.25
IN	0.5	0.5	0.75	0.5	0	0	1	3.25
NE	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.5	0	1	1	3.25
HI	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	3
KS	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	3
LA	0	1	0.25	0.75	0	0	1	3
MA	0	0	0.25	0.75	0	1	1	3
MN	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	3
PA	0.5	0.5	0.75	0.25	0	1	0	3
AZ	0	0	0.5	0.25	1	0	1	2.75
KY	0.25	0.5	0.5	0.5	0	0	1	2.75
NC	0	0	0.25	0.5	1	0	1	2.75
OK	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.75	0	0	1	2.5
WI	0.25	0.25	0.5	0.5	0	1	0	2.5
MD	0.25	0.25	0.5	0.25	0	0	1	2.25
VA	0.25	0.25	0.5	0.25	0	0	1	2.75
FL	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	2
GA	0.5	0.25	0	0.25	0	0	1	2
NV	0	0	0.25	0.75	0	0	1	2
SD	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
AL	0	0	0	0.5	0	0	1	1.5
AK	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
MO	0.5	0.25	0	0.25	0	0	0	1
MT	0	0	0.25	0.75	0	0	0	1

It is essential to note that states scoring the highest were noticeably diverse when compared to a state like New York and Wyoming. For example, these states varied drastically in the presence and absence of urban centers, political affiliation of state leadership, and urban/rural landscapes. When considering the ten states that scored at or below a 2.5, South Dakota was the only state that ranked in the top two quartiles for more than one of the educational categories evaluated. Florida was the only state in this group that had adopted more than one recommended policy. The nine states with the lowest performance were Missouri, Montana, Alaska, Alabama, Nevada, South Dakota, Georgia, Florida, Maryland, and Oklahoma.

Discussion

Prison education is a vital yet understudied area within corrections literature. This study highlighted the varied educational offerings across the US and demonstrated how both institutional factors and state-level policy decisions shape disparities in access to prison education. Significant differences exist in the availability of educational programs, adoption of supportive policies, and overall accessibility of educational opportunities within correctional institutions. These disparities persist despite overwhelming evidence that correctional education improves post-release employment, reduces recidivism, and generates long-term cost savings.

The findings indicate substantial regional variation in prison education access, with Southern states consistently underperforming compared to their Northeastern and Western counterparts. This disparity is not coincidental but reflects long-standing policy and funding decisions that have shaped correctional education access over time. Many Southern states have historically prioritized punitive sentencing over rehabilitative programming, leading to lower investment in educational services and fewer structured educational opportunities within their correctional systems (Henrichson & Delaney, 2012). Additionally, these states tend to lack centralized oversight structures for prison education, resulting in inconsistent program availability across facilities (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2023). In contrast, states in the Northeast and West have integrated correctional education into broader justice reform efforts, ensuring more structured and well-funded programming.

One of the most notable findings is the relationship between program availability and inmate participation rates. States where at least 75% of prisons offer vocational training tend to report inmate participation rates exceeding 50%, whereas states with limited vocational education availability (below 40%) show significantly lower enrollment levels. A 10% increase in the availability of vocational education opportunities corresponds to a 2% increase in participation rates, underscoring the importance of accessibility in driving engagement. However, while this suggests a strong association, it does not necessarily establish causation. Other institutional factors – such as state funding levels, correctional staffing, and security classifications – may also influence participation trends. Future research employing regression analyses or experimental designs could help isolate the direct impact of program availability on inmate participation.

The results also indicate no consistent correlation between a prison's security classification and the availability of educational programs. Literacy, ABE, secondary, and vocational programs were available at similar levels across minimum, medium, and high-security institutions. However, low-security facilities were less likely to offer ESL and college courses but more likely to provide study release programs. This suggests that low-security institutions compensate for fewer on-site educational options by implementing study release programs, allowing incarcerated persons to access education through external partnerships. These findings reinforce the need for a structured and consistent policy framework that ensures access to educational programming regardless of institutional security level.

Furthermore, state-level participation in federally funded initiatives also plays a role in shaping prison education opportunities. While many states have embraced programs like the Second Chance Pell initiative, others – particularly in the South – have been slower to adopt these funding opportunities due to administrative hurdles or political resistance (Taber & Muralidharan, 2023). Additionally, states with stronger workforce development strategies tend to offer more robust vocational education programs, aligning correctional education with post-release employment pathways. Without such initiatives, states

with low educational access may struggle to provide incarcerated persons with the credentials needed for employment, further exacerbating post-release barriers.

Policy implications

The findings from this study emphasize the need for a more cohesive and supportive policy framework for prison education. While many states have implemented strong educational programs, significant gaps remain in access, policy adoption, and funding priorities. Addressing these issues requires targeted policy interventions at both the state and federal levels.

One essential step toward improving correctional education is ensuring that all incarcerated individuals undergo an educational assessment upon entry into the correctional system. Many states operate on voluntary enrollment models, leaving those with the lowest literacy and educational levels least likely to participate. By mandating assessments and automatic enrollment for individuals who lack a high school diploma or GED, correctional institutions can proactively place incarcerated persons in appropriate educational programs, increasing participation rates and reducing long-term recidivism.

In addition, states should establish centralized oversight structures for prison education to promote consistency in program quality, curriculum alignment, and workforce preparation. Many states lack a dedicated administrative body overseeing correctional education, leading to inconsistencies in funding, program quality, and access across facilities. Creating a designated office or a prison-specific school district would enhance coordination between correctional institutions, community colleges, and industry partners, ensuring standardized and workforce-relevant educational opportunities.

To encourage participation in prison education, correctional institutions should implement structured incentive systems. Providing sentence reduction credits for program completion, offering priority placement in work-release programs, and developing certification pathways linked to post-release employment can significantly increase engagement in educational programs. In states where such incentives exist, participation rates tend to be higher, and recidivism rates lower.

Another important avenue for improvement is expanding public-private partnerships to strengthen vocational and postsecondary education in prisons. Collaborations between prisons, community colleges, and private-sector employers can help bridge gaps in job training and certification programs, ensuring that incarcerated individuals have access to credentials that translate into real-world employment opportunities post-release. Successful models in California and Ohio have demonstrated that strong employer partnerships increase job placements and reduce reliance on state-funded reentry programs. Examining these states' approaches could provide a blueprint for other jurisdictions seeking to improve educational offerings.

Finally, policymakers should explore funding mechanisms that prioritize prison education. This includes performance-based funding models, which tie correctional education investment to measurable outcomes such as program completion rates, post-release employment, and recidivism reduction. States such as Florida and New York have successfully implemented these structures, but policymakers should also consider other innovative funding strategies that ensure sustained investment in prison education initiatives.

Collectively or independently, these policy recommendations can strengthen the role of education in reducing recidivism, easing reentry, and ultimately improving public safety. As states continue refining their prison education policies, greater emphasis should be placed on ensuring that all incarcerated individuals – regardless of facility type or location – have equitable access to programs that equip them with the skills necessary for reintegration into society.

Limitations

Though this study is the first of its kind to establish a scoring system to rank state prison education access, it is not without its limitations. First, the data used for this study were compiled from multiple sources, including the 2019 Census of State and Federal Adult Correctional Facilities and additional state policy data. As such, discrepancies may exist between how facilities and states report educational programming,

potentially leading to incomplete or inconsistent information about available services. Additionally, because the Census relies on self-reported data from correctional institutions, variations in reporting practices may introduce bias, particularly regarding the scope and quality of education programs.

Second, the data used were from 2016 and 2019. Given that the landscape of prison education has changed following the COVID-19 pandemic and the reintroduction of Pell Grant funding through the Second Chance Pell initiative, some of these educational programs may have either expanded or been eliminated since the time of data collection. Future research utilizing more recent data would provide a clearer picture of current programming availability and effectiveness.

Finally, this study focuses exclusively on education programs within state and federal prisons, excluding jails, which house a significant portion of the incarcerated population. Since jails often operate under different administrative structures and have shorter average lengths of stay, their educational programming may differ substantially from that of prisons. Expanding the analysis to include jail-based education initiatives would provide a more comprehensive understanding of prison education access across different types of facilities.

Conclusion

This study provides the first attempt at developing a standardized scoring system to evaluate prison education programs across private, state, and federal institutions. Given the significant expansion of federal funding through the Second Chance Act (SCA) and Second Chance Pell (SCP) initiatives, ensuring that prison education programs are equitably distributed and effectively implemented is critical. Findings highlight substantial disparities in educational access, with regional differences, institutional characteristics, and policy decisions shaping the availability of programming.

Prior studies demonstrate that prison education plays a crucial role in reducing recidivism, improving employment outcomes, and providing economic benefits through cost savings and workforce reintegration. However, the current study found that many states lack cohesive policies that ensure incarcerated individuals have equal access to education, leaving some incarcerated persons with limited or no opportunities for academic or vocational advancement. The scoring system introduced in this study offers policymakers and correctional administrators a comparative framework to assess their state's performance relative to others. By identifying strengths and weaknesses, this metric can guide efforts to expand access to educational programming in correctional settings.

Ultimately, the findings underscore the need for a more structured and supportive policy framework at both the state level. States that have embraced centralized oversight, automatic enrollment, and structured incentive systems have demonstrated greater success in prison education participation rates and reentry outcomes. As policymakers refine their approaches to correctional education, adopting evidence-based policies and ensuring equitable access across all institutions will be essential. Future research should continue to assess the long-term impact of prison education programs, particularly in the wake of Pell Grant reinstatement, to measure how these initiatives affect reentry success and recidivism over time.

By leveraging a data-driven approach to assess and enhance prison education, correctional systems can better prepare incarcerated individuals for reintegration into society, ultimately improving public safety and reducing the financial burden of incarceration.

Notes

1. This finding is from the 2016 Survey of Prison Inmates.
2. This analysis excludes Alaska as Alaska reported 0 educational programs across all facilities, despite the Alaska Department of Corrections' documentation that confirms its existence. In grading states below, we have no choice but to use Alaska's reported educational offerings, even if they are almost certainly the result of a failure to report educational programs correctly.
3. Other prison characteristics were considered for this analysis. Specifically, we examined staff-to-prison ratios, the presence of court orders due to prison conditions, population density of the prison's county, presidential vote, and share of the prison's state and the state's unemployment rate. No other characteristics were found to have systematic differences in educational programming availability.

4. The South consists of Alabama, Arkansas, Washington D.C., Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.
5. When calculating state scores, ESL, special education, and study release programs were omitted. ESL is highly dependent upon the demographic composition of an incarcerated population, which is out of the control of a state department of correction. Special education programs are usually an adaptation of an ABE or similar program, not necessarily a standalone program. Lastly, study release programs offer both vocational and college education in other delivery methods; therefore, they do not need to be a standalone category.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Steven Sprick Schuster:** Conceptualization, Methodology; **Andrew S. Denney:** Writing – review & editing; **Ben Stickle:** Funding acquisition, Project administration, Writing – review & editing.

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